

GrOWiNg uP gIRL

by Kate Rossiter

"Growing Up Girl" est un ensemble de poèmes accompagnés d'un court texte théorique écrits à partir de l'expérience de la féminisation à travers le corps vécue par une féministe 3e vague. Les poèmes et l'essai explorent le corps féminin comme une source de connaissance et de résistance au patriarcat.

Every gesture, every word involves our past, present and future. The body never stops accumulating, and years and years have gone by mine without my being able to stop them, stop it. (Minh-ha)

The female body has many uses... It sells cars, beer, shaving lotion, cigarettes, hard liquor; it sells diet plans and diamonds, and desire in tiny crystal bottles. Is this the face that launched a thousand products? You bet it is, but don't get any funny big ideas, that honey smile is a dime a dozen... It does not merely sell, it is sold. Money flows into this country or that country, flies in, practically crawls in, suitful after suitful, lured by all those hairless pre-teen legs. Listen, you want to reduce the national debt, don't you? Aren't you patriotic? That's the spirit. That's my girl.. (Atwood)

I am 23 years old. I am at an age in my life where small children have stopped asking me, with hesitation, "Are you a big person or a little person?" I am a grown up person, and, out of the experiences of my past few years, an independent one at that. However "grown up" I might

be, I am never far from my adolescence. For me, reaching puberty and adulthood was not only a time of great change in my life, but a time when my politics became physicalized. My changing body and physical identity became the sight of knowledge and experience about girlhood, womanhood, and femininity. At puberty, my mind and my body separated from the world around them, became aware of themselves and one another. At puberty, I learned what it was to be female.

Like my mother and grandmothers, I have undergone a process of "forced feminization." As I began to connect myself with their experiences of pain and vulnerability through the strictures of patriarchy, I began (unconsciously) to explore sites of my own vulnerability, particularly as I had experienced it through my body "growing up girl." My grandmothers were faced with a complete lack of choice or freedom with regard to how they wanted to live and what social positions they occupied. Now, society and patriarchy has shifted, and while my choices have expanded enormously in the area of what women can do or be, I feel that I was given few (if any) options on how to look, act, and feel in the body of a young North American woman. Forced feminization for me has meant looking, rather than acting, in a certain prescribed way.

"The female body poses an enormous problem for American girls" (xvii) writes Joan Jacobs Brumberg in *The Body Project*, her highly-acclaimed study of contemporary North American girl culture. Brumberg discusses the "body problem" of contemporary North American girls, il-

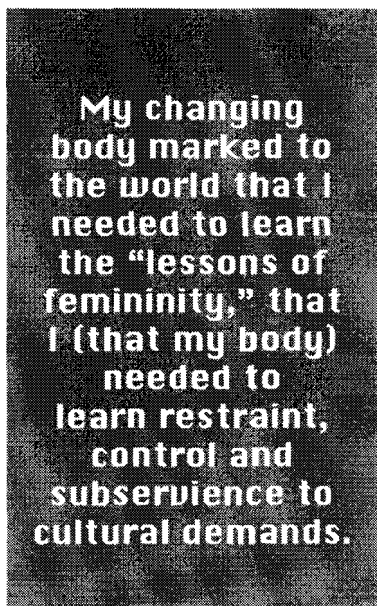
lustrating her discussion with poignant photographs, such as a graffitied university wall, scrawled with: "Our Bodies Make Us Worry." "By age thirteen," Brumberg writes,

53 percent of American girls are unhappy with their bodies; by age seventeen, 78 percent are dissatisfied ... talk about the body and *learning how to improve it* is a central motif in publications and media aimed at adolescent girls. [emphasis added] (xxiv)

Like many writers, Brumberg theorizes the female body as a permanent, stable, passive object, a receptacle/receptor for the penetration of cultural gazes. Typically, it is understood that gazes change while bodies remain rooted in the stability of physicality. The body remains apolitical while politics are formed by mental and intellectual analyses of

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the body. Identity and body image, then, remain separate from the body. I feel that my body is not simply a passive receptor or object on which my politics rest or around which they revolve; my politics change with my body and my body changes with my politics. Starting at puberty, and over the last ten years, I learned that my



body is a political landscape, a site of conflict and a sight of resistance.

As I reached the age of 13, my body began to grow and change. As these changes occurred, my experience of "being" changed radically as well. Suddenly, as I felt the insistent and critical cultural gaze of those around me, I was aware that I had a body, and, moreover, a body that I had to do something about. My changing body marked to the world that I needed to learn the "lessons of femininity," that I (that my body) needed to learn restraint, control and subservience to cultural demands.

My own acquiescence to these demands marked a time when a modernist, patriarchal framework became acutely learned. These lessons, like the subtle lessons of patriarchy which my grandmothers both learned and taught me, were ones which were private and hidden. I learned what my body was supposed to do and look like through "obvious secrets":

through the images of the "perfect" female body, through the condemning and revealing whispers of girls and women around me when someone didn't "get it right."

Simply, my mind was to control my body, my body became a capitalized commodity which needed attending to and fixing, which needed a (self) consciousness. Puberty was not simply a time of physical change, but of learning the ways in which the body becomes a "political landscape." The private and secret issues of my body were, in fact, expressions of the politics of patriarchy. As I began to change physically, I began to understand the ways that culture marked itself upon my body and the way that my body marked itself upon culture. Michel Foucault writes:

The body is moulded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances. (qtd. in Lash 60)

I do not have a distinct or primary memory of when I first understood the cultural significance which my body carried. I know these experiences began when my body began to embark upon "becoming a woman," and I suddenly noticed that, by cultural standards, I was "not right." What I did not immediately notice was that *no one* was right; that the cultural standards to which I moulded myself were ways of forcing feminization on all women, not a template of normal that I happened not to fit. Gradually, over the course of a few years, I undertook the process of feminization through the body. Through my physical experience of "becoming a woman," I learned what culture expected of me, as a female, and, more importantly, understood the myriad of ways the female body is organized to "fit" patriarchal moulds of femininity. My body was, and is, shaped by patriarchy and resistances

to patriarchy.

As I have begun a process of self-exploration through writing, I have continually circled back to the experiences of growing-up bodies in contemporary culture. For me, the body has been a source of conflict in many ways. The female body, Sidonie Smith writes is a "battleground upon which the struggle for cultural meaning is waged" (qtd. in Boudreau 44). That has meant struggles for autonomy, from my family, my community and, eventually, from the confines which culture had offered up as "norms." At 13, physical autonomy meant finding ways to separate my own decisions around my body from the decisions my mother had made for me throughout my life. At 22, physical autonomy means finding ways of making conscious decisions about my body separate from those which the oppressive dictates of patriarchy would have me make.

Writing about these conflicts which have been sparked, waged, and enacted through the body, has been an important step in naming the political power inherently contained in physical experience. The body is both what separates and unifies humans and human experience. If, as many feminists assert, the "personal is political," the body remains the primary sight of personal experience and potential politicization through naming and sharing "body knowledge."

I write my body politic to counter a modernist, patriarchal ontology which would have me believe that my body is simply an appendage of the mind, and not a worthy "knower" of political experience. I write to counter structures, feminist and non-feminist, which would remove the agency and efficacy I possess within my body and would have me believe that my "mental" politics are somehow more important. I write to unite and explore my physical, emotional and mental experiences of "growing up girl."

"Growing up Girl" is a series of poems (one of which follows this

narration) and stories which have helped me express ways in which my body became a sight of political knowledge, specifically as I entered into adulthood. Within these stories I have begun to explore the ways in which culture shapes gaze and gaze shapes physical experience and physical experience becomes political understanding. Through writing, my own experience has become named and identified, and, potentially, become a sight for the identification of the "body politic" for others.

Kate Rossiter is a recent graduate of Mount Allison University where she studied drama and women's studies. She is interested in the intersection between art, activism and personal politics and often chooses to enact her politics through creative writing, visual arts and theatre. Currently, Kate lives in Toronto and works with developmentally delayed adults.

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- Scantly lit changing room
Your mother just outside the
flimsy, dirty-pink plywood door
which you have bolted for
the first time,
waiting—
the picture of patient anxiety—
- "Honey, can I PLEASE come in and look?"
"no."
"Okay, well I'm going to look around for some other—"
"NO, DON'T GO!"
- Your lust for autonomy
Is painful
As you tug at your own swelling breasts,
Now covered in a
Virgin-white
Material (cottonblend. practical.),
Bows and all.

This is your First Time.
Your First taste of cups and straps
and
Underwire, taut against your skin.
Your First foray into
The Women's section
Of the Bay.

Your First real dissatisfied
Examination of self
Eyes glared,
half-shut
In front of the full length mirror,
Half naked,
(Searching the cold, glassy flesh
For a body which
You never knew was there,

That your eyes have
Not seen until now)

Scantly lit changing room
Your mother just outside the
flimsy, dirty-pink plywood door
which you have bolted for
the first time,
waiting—
the picture of patient anxiety—

"Honey, can I PLEASE come in and look?"
"no."
"Okay, well I'm going to look around for some other—"
"NO, DON'T GO!"

Your lust for autonomy
Is painful
As you tug at your own swelling breasts,
Now covered in a
Virgin-white
Material (cottonblend. practical.),
Bows and all.

This is your first training bra.

*If only you could have been sure
Of what you were training
Or training for.*

TRAINING BRA

*no athlete, you,
You wondered if
perhaps there is a giant
Booby marathon
That no-one
Informed you of...*

*Girls, take your places!
On your mark!
Get set!
Go!*

*We must!
We must!
We must improve our bust!*

*Thousands of perfectly-breasted girls
March towards an unseen finish line,
Flapping their arms in time,
You envisioned yourself straggling
behind,
Lost and limp-busted.*

The bra is not your idea;
"Bra" is still a dirty word.
Your first friend
In junior high
Has pulled you aside
Has taken your conformity,
Your normalcy
On her shoulders
("some of us have been talking...
and...um...
We think you need to get a...
bra.")
Leaving you shamed
And
mortified
Because you had not realized
Your own imposition on the
world,
As if you had been blindly
wandering around
Naked all this time—

*Eve
Casts herself out of Eden
Clothing her shivering, fleshy
Self*

*In Wonder
Bra
And the disdainful look
Inherited from above*

*You will realize that
God is not a man at all,
But the woman on the wonderbra
box
Who teaches you how to see your
own sin]*

*Later, as your mother tucked you
into bed,
Kissed you goodnight,
You broke the news
Of you burgeoning Womanhood
("mumyouneedtogetmeabra"
"Sorry, honey, I missed that. You
need a what?"
"Ineedaberaaah")
And was surprised when she
wasn't crushed
Too*

*Some mothers tell
Their daughters
To buy the bra
One size too small.
An assurance
That the goods
Will fit snugly
Into the palm
Of a man's hand.*

*Training bra.
Maybe it is the breasts themselves*

*That need training.
With no training bra
Who's to say that they won't
Turn out as unambitious,
Useless
Inert
Pieces of flesh?
Nipples will not be
Inspired to grow on such
Beguiled
Lumps of fat.
Saggy.
Sad.*

*Upon emerging from
The pathetic
Little stall
That seemed to
Promise personal
Transformation,
The sales clerk
Rushes over,
Grabs you by your
Brand-new
Bra straps and
Yells:
"MY – WHAT A CHESTY THING WE
HAVE HERE!"
And you storm
Back into the stall
And cry,
humiliated
Because you never asked for this.*

*Because
What you are being
Trained for*

*Is to be looked at.
The world
Will start noticing your
'Bits'
And better
That you,
(That your parts)
Are prepared,
Trained
To withstand
The tint of eyes
Which will
Stain
And
Restain

Because these glaring, tinted eyes
Are
your own.

It is *your* gaze
Which has been carefully trained
To appraise:
Your eyebrows which have been
Shaped in a shapely arch
Of contempt

Your eyes which scan
Flesh and fabric
With disdain,

Your mouth which whispers curses,

Your hands which grab and squeeze

Your body which lies
Flattened by glass and metal.*

New Resources for Immigration Research

Online Content Enhancement Project (OCEP)

The Online Content Enhancement Project (OCEP) involves the development of a new online resource as well as the digitalization of a collection of historical documents dealing with immigration and settlement. Collaborating in this project are the Centre for Refugee Studies (CRS), York University, the Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement B Toronto (CERIS), and CIC, Ontario Administration of Settlement and Integration Services (OASIS). This project has been funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ontario Region (OASIS). The historical documents for digitalization and posting consist of selected papers from the collections of CERIS, OASIS and CRS. The documents are selected based on their historical and contemporary significance, as well as their limited circulation. Take advantage of this unique initiative in online collaboration to promote access to vital historical immigration research documents by visiting:

http://www.yorku.ca/crs/resource_centre.htm, <http://www.settlement.org>, <http://ceris.metropolis.net>

